



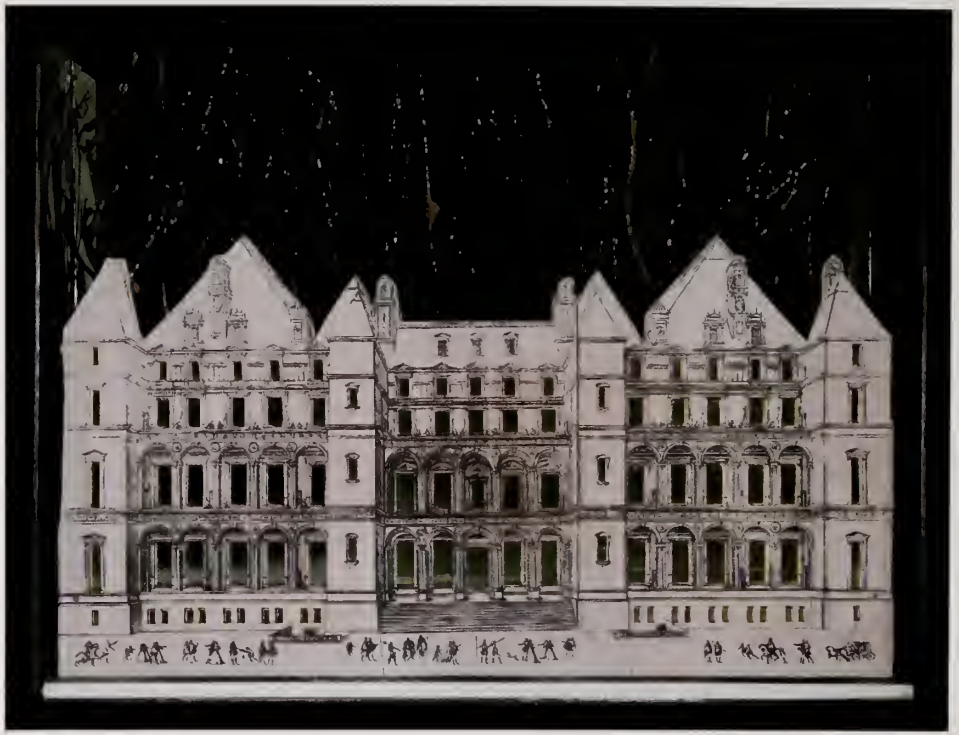
MINIATURE

ENVIRONMENTS

Whitney Museum of American Art

at Philip Morris

August 2–September 27, 1989



Joseph Cornell, *Rose Castle*, 1945

THIS EXHIBITION OF SMALL-SCALE WORKS of art is about how we view art as much as it is about the art itself. For many of us, viewing art requires overcoming resistance. Art attracts us, but we do not always comprehend it; and we get tired, impatient, or bored. We are accustomed to seeing art in museums and galleries from a distance, either for reasons of scale or security, and this distance is psychological as well as physical.

Artists working in miniature attempt to contravene these viewing habits, drawing us into an experience that is unexpectedly intimate and intense. And they structure the psychology of our responses into their aesthetic systems. The miniaturization of scale is a strategy for making art unimintimidating and approachable and for inducing physical—and emotional—proximity. The affective nature of miniature artworks comes from childhood associations, which the toylike scale activates, and from the sense of secretiveness or of sharing private visions that smallness engenders. Artists also consider the beholder's position relative to the work of art: should it be from on high, to create a feeling of omnipotence; or should the work be viewed at eye level, which offers a sense of equivalence; or should the viewer,

like Alice in Wonderland, look through a peephole? The size, shape, depth, and placement of this aperture in miniature box constructions are designed to guide our approach to the work and control our manner of viewing.

Our reactions to miniature artworks are sometimes complex. With objects so small we could cradle them in our hands, we feel authoritative and in control. Who cannot grasp the meaning of something whose parts are only inches high? Yet the densely packed or layered nature of some miniature art exerts a powerful hold over us. Such impulses are encouraged by the wide range of human affairs and history condensed into some miniaturized visions—as in the philosophical scope of Joseph Cornell's constructions or the apocalyptic character of Charles Simonds' and Aimee Rankin's miniature environments.

The intensity of viewing small-scale works is compounded in box constructions (the box is the basic form of half the works in this show). According to Lucas Samaras—known for his constructed boxes—the box form is a psychologically compelling structure to the modern public: it subliminally reminds city dwellers how much their lives are defined by the box. For some, the box

symbolizes shelter; for others, unwelcome confinement. As Samaras observes, most of us work, sleep, and eat in boxes. Layered onto these modern notions are older, mythic associations of the box: as container of magic secrets, as coffin, or as a chest of problems, whose lid—like Pandora's box—is best left tightly closed. When artists combine diminutive scale and the box, they provoke a twofold psychological response. James Connor's *Apothecary Box* (1986)—like Joseph Cornell's boxes—plays with the concept of the artist as apothecary who mixes spellbinding dreams and visions. His *Egyptian Funerary Box I* (1981) and *II* (1982) remind us of the function of the box as coffin. Is the miniaturization designed to shrink our fear of death? When we look through the peephole of Aimee Rankin's boxes, *Cruelty* (1987), *The Tomb* (1987–88), and *The Monster* (1989), are we conspiring with the artist to lift the lid of Pandora's box?

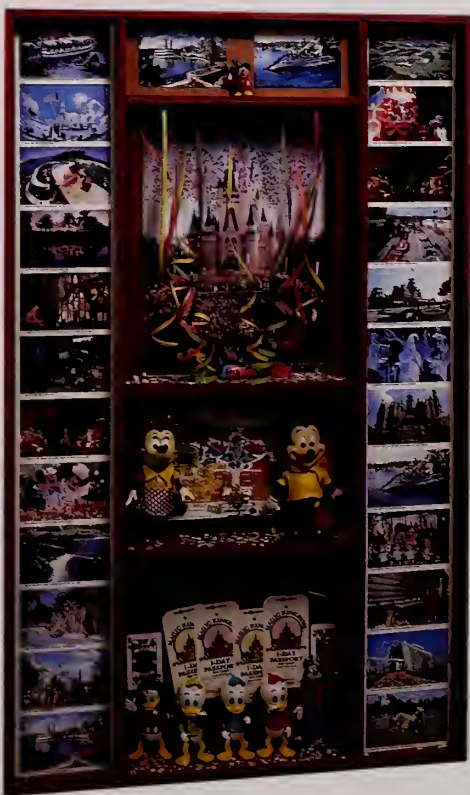
Real-life houses often function as symbolic displacements for emotional states: did Tony Berlant, Lynne Clibanoff, and Mark Dean—all of whom created miniature box dwellings—intend a magic metonymic reference for their work? Berlant's *Apple House* (1967) is Twain-like in its emblems of a happy American boyhood. Shingled with tin apples cut from juice cans and containing a rubber ball visible through its wide apertures, it brings together two potent symbols of innocent childhood: the apple and the ball. Dean's landscapes and interiors, which are painted on the exterior of the box-house *Small Privilege* (1984), exorcise the pain of the troubled teenage years he spent in his family's Midwest home. Lynne Clibanoff is an architect of powerful, De Chiricoesque internal spaces for the dramatic production of moods and dreams.

There are older genealogies of the box as an artist's tool for optical experiments, a tool now being recycled and applied to different purposes by some of the artists in this exhibition. The sixteenth-century *camera obscura* was a dark box with lenses and mirrors. The artist looked through the lens at an object (a nude figure, a landscape) and traced the reflected image. Using the *camera immobilis* (also a sixteenth-century technology), the artist traced the reversed

images of built environments. The earliest peep show boxes had scenes of seventeenth-century Dutch interiors and streets viewed through lens-covered apertures.

These early peep show boxes bring to mind Susan Leopold's exterior and interior views in constructed boxes whose peepholes are fish-eye lenses. She has elevated the box from an artist's tool to a finished work. And she capitalizes on the surprise factor: the smooth black exteriors reveal nothing of the magical scenes inside—views through the artist's studio windows into illusionistically perfect, panoramic vistas. Leopold's subject, the view from a window, develops from a nineteenth-century Romantic iconography in which the open window symbolizes a longing for escape. Through open doors and windows we gaze at decayed industrial architecture. Do these vistas symbolize the malaise of a post-industrial age, or a personal loss? The miniaturized view encircled by the ring of the lenses evokes the locket of Victorian keepsake jewelry, in which the image of the departed was carefully preserved.

In the late 1960s, Richard Haas constructed dioramas showing artists in their studios. *Jackson Pollock* (1966) and *Frank*



James Connor, *Welcome to the Magic Kingdom*, 1983



Lynne Clibanoff, *Untitled*, 1988

Lloyd Wright (1968) had particular significance, since they symbolized the difficult choice he had to make between becoming a painter and an architect. Haas' next step was to construct dioramas of the street viewed from his studio in SoHo, as in *Greene Street Looking South* (1970). In effect, his cabinet-sized dioramas acted as the *camera obscura* of his imagination. Within a few years, Haas began painting large-scale architectural illusions on the exteriors of SoHo buildings, monumentalizing and "going public" with what had hitherto been for him a miniature and private art. Michael Hurson's emotionally laconic, cleanly constructed *Thurman Buzzard's Apartment* (1973–74) also promoted a creative transition. The miniaturized work led Hurson to write a play, *Red and Blue* (1982), in which Thurman Buzzard, the imaginary character of the apartment, metamorphosed into the drama's narrator.

Joseph Cornell, that most Proustian, evocative, and seemingly private of American artists, is the modern ancestor of box construction artists. The main element of *Rose Castle* (1945) is a photostat of a sixteenth-century engraving of the now-destroyed Château de Madrid in Paris with groups of courtiers and soldiers in the foreground; Cornell has added twigs and a mirror at the back. The most intriguing feature of the castle is its many windows and doors, which the artist cut out and filled with mirrors. Did he intend these

mirrored openings to be the "eyes" (or fenestrated "souls") of the work? Are they thereby devices that communicate with the viewer in much the same way as a Renaissance or Baroque figure looks out of the canvas and engages our gaze? The Viennese art historian Alois Riegl believed that windows in modern paintings, such as those by Gustav Klimt and Egon Schiele, functioned as direct communicators with the viewer. Riegl was arguing that art is not a self-contained entity but is, rather, a two-way system in which the viewer plays a necessary part. And artists have means of openly inviting—or subtly manipulating—the viewer into a silent exchange with the art object. In this kind of reciprocal arrangement, art functions not so much as a representation to be passively consumed, but more like an offer to share actively in a vision of the world. Riegl's theory of the artwork-viewer relationship also structures our understanding of the intensity of the experience that miniature box constructions with apertures or peepholes provoke from us.

Few artists possess the bite of Jonathan Swift, the social satirist whose diminutive Lilliputians form an important part of *Gulliver's Travels*. But some artists do use miniature dimensions to satirize or otherwise critically comment on contemporary society. Tom Foolery tackles the art world, making sly connections between the marketing of art and the marketing of women's

bodies. Above the art gallery in *Art's Art* (1989) is a floor labeled "Lilly's Pleasure Palace," and a cat signifies the meaning of it all by urinating on a canvas stacked against a wall on the right.

The wastage in contemporary society as well as urban ills and fears are subtly conveyed in the miniaturized tableaux by Paul Hunter and Michael McMillen. Through the aperture of Hunter's *Homeless* (1986) we look into the simulation of a cavernous lobby of a train station; around the edges we gradually discern the reclining, huddled, and begging figures of the homeless. In McMillen's *Nipomo* (1980), the shell of an abandoned roadside diner stands atop a column composed of layers of rocks. With a brevity of description, McMillen has created a critical emblem of human folly by juxtaposing the decaying diner with the earth's geological strata. Charles Simonds uses the architecture of ancient crumbling civilizations to give a more apocalyptic frame to his tableaux. In *Wilted Towers* (1984), he condemns the phallogentric structure of societies by making its two collapsing forms flaccid. The sadistic world Aimee Rankin creates for the viewer (complete with sound) implies

the chaos of existence, which she invokes with jerkily robotized monsters, skeletons, and skulls—things that would not be amiss in a miniaturized *Rocky Horror Picture Show*. Rankin also attempts to subvert what feminist theory perceives as the phallogentric nature of vision, that is, the command of a single and powerful vantage point, derived from Renaissance perspective. In her boxes, Rankin deconstructs the phallogentric gaze through mirrors and a complex organization of objects, which force the viewer to engage with the artwork from multiple viewpoints.

Rankin wants us to exchange our singular method of viewing the world for a multiple one. Each of the artists in the exhibition, in different ways, asks us to alter our viewing habits—and, by extension, the way we see life around us. By reducing scale, they have made looking at art, and even the subjects of their works—which range from death to the ills of contemporary society—less intimidating. And this is an accomplishment of some magnitude. Beguiled by the diminished scale, we are drawn unawares into the seriousness of their projects.

JOSEPHINE GEAR



Susan Leopold, *River View*, 1989

**Whitney Museum of American Art
at Philip Morris**

120 Park Avenue
New York, New York 10017
(212) 878-2453
Free Admission

Gallery Hours

Monday–Saturday, 11:00 am–6:00 pm
Thursday, 11:00 am–7:30 pm

Sculpture Court Hours

Monday–Saturday, 7:30 am–9:30 pm
Sunday, 11:00 am–7:00 pm

Gallery Talks

Monday, Wednesday, Friday, 12:30 pm
Tours by appointment
For more information, call (212) 878-2453

Staff

Pamela Gruninger Perkins
Head, Branch Museums

Josephine Gear
Branch Director

Jeanette Vuocolo
Manager

Peter Naumann
Gallery Assistant

Clare Spindler
Gallery Assistant

**The Whitney Museum of
American Art at Philip Morris
is funded by Philip Morris
Companies Inc.**

Special thanks are extended to intern
Masako Murata for helping with the
research for this publication.

Photographs by Sheldon Collins
(Connor); Lee Sampson (Leopold);
and Steven Sloman (Cornell).

Design: Katy Homans
Typesetting: Trufont Typographers, Inc.
Printing: Conceptual Litho

© 1989 Whitney Museum of American Art
945 Madison Avenue
New York, New York 10021

WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

Dimensions are in inches; height precedes width precedes depth.

Tony Berlant (b. 1941)

The Apple House, 1967

Metal and wood, $15\frac{1}{2} \times 10\frac{3}{4} \times 14\frac{3}{4}$
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Purchase, with funds from the Howard and Jean Lipman Foundation, Inc. 68.41

Down East No. 34, 1986

Painted tin and wood, $34\frac{1}{2} \times 34\frac{1}{2} \times 24\frac{1}{2}$
L.A. Louver Gallery, Venice, California

Lynne Clibanoff (b. 1944)

Middle Ages, 1984

Construction with electric light,
 $16\frac{1}{2} \times 22 \times 10\frac{1}{2}$
Private collection

Dream, 1987

Construction with electric light,
 $19 \times 26 \times 10$
Collection of Kathryn Markel

Untitled, 1988

Construction with electric light,
 $21\frac{1}{4} \times 23\frac{1}{2} \times 11\frac{1}{2}$
Collection of the artist

James Connor (b. 1943)

Egyptian Funerary Box I, 1981

Mixed-media construction,
 $10 \times 8 \times 16$
Collection of the artist

Egyptian Funerary Box II, 1982

Mixed-media construction,
 $12 \times 12 \times 6$
Collection of the artist

Welcome to the Magic Kingdom, 1983

Mixed-media construction,
 $49 \times 29 \times 3\frac{1}{2}$
Collection of the artist

Apothecary Box, 1986

Mixed-media construction,
 $31\frac{1}{4} \times 24\frac{1}{4} \times 4\frac{1}{2}$
Collection of the artist

Joseph Cornell (1903–1972)

Rose Castle, 1945

Wood, paper, paint, mirror, tree twigs, and tinsel dust, $11\frac{1}{2} \times 14\frac{7}{8} \times 4$
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Kay Sage Tanguy Bequest 64.51

Mark Dean (b. 1958)

Small Privilege, 1984

Casein on panel, $6 \times 6 \times 7\frac{3}{4}$
Private collection; courtesy Barbara Guggenheim Associates, New York, and Sharpe Gallery, New York

Tom Foolery (b. 1947)

Art Movers, 1985

Mixed-media construction,
 $9 \times 9 \times 12$
Collection of the artist

Alley Cat, 1989

Mixed-media construction,
 $8 \times 12 \times 12$
Collection of the artist

Art's Art, 1989

Mixed-media construction,
 $6 \times 6 \times 11$
Collection of the artist

Richard Haas (b. 1936)

Jackson Pollock in His Studio at Springs, Long Island, 1966

Mixed-media construction,
 $17 \times 14 \times 19\frac{1}{4}$
Collection of the artist

Frank Lloyd Wright in the Studio at Taliesin East, 1968

Mixed-media construction,
 $15 \times 15 \times 16\frac{1}{8}$
Collection of the artist

Greene Street Looking South, 1970

Mixed-media construction,
 $20 \times 18 \times 20\frac{1}{2}$
Collection of the artist

Paul Hunter (b. 1954)

Homeless, 1986

Mixed-media construction,

$2\frac{1}{2} \times 72 \times 23\frac{1}{8}$

Collection of the artist

New York, 1986

Mixed-media construction,

$2\frac{1}{2} \times 72 \times 23\frac{1}{8}$

Collection of the artist

Michael Hurson (b. 1941)

Thurman Buzzard's Apartment, 1973-74

Balsa wood, $8\frac{1}{2} \times 64\frac{1}{2} \times 24$

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Purchase, with funds from the John

I.H. Baur Purchase Fund 77.70

Susan Leopold (b. 1960)

Empty Factory, 1989

Mixed-media construction,

$12 \times 14 \times 15\frac{3}{4}$

John Weber Gallery, New York

River View, 1989

Mixed-media construction,

$15\frac{1}{2} \times 16\frac{1}{2} \times 16$

John Weber Gallery, New York

Rooms for Doubt, 1989

Mixed-media construction,

$18\frac{1}{4} \times 48\frac{1}{2} \times 18\frac{1}{4}$

John Weber Gallery, New York

Michael McMillen (b. 1946)

Nipomo, 1980

Mixed-media construction, $74 \times 11 \times 11$

Los Angeles County Museum of Art;

Modern and Contemporary Art Council

Young Talent Purchase Award

Lost Lake, 1983

Mixed-media construction,

$23 \times 20\frac{1}{4} \times 36$

L.A. Louver Gallery, Venice, California

Astoria, 1987

Painted wood and metal construction,

$63\frac{1}{2} \times 21\frac{1}{2} \times 8\frac{1}{2}$

Collection of Helene Wasserman

Aimee Rankin (b. 1958)

Cruelty, from the series *Ecstasy*, 1987

Mixed-media construction,

$20 \times 24 \times 24$

Postmasters Gallery, New York

The Tomb, from the series

Atrocities, 1987-88

Mixed-media construction,

$22\frac{1}{2} \times 22\frac{1}{2} \times 22\frac{1}{2}$

Postmasters Gallery, New York

The Monster, from the series *Atrocities*, 1989

Mixed-media construction,

$22\frac{1}{2} \times 22\frac{1}{2} \times 22\frac{1}{2}$

Postmasters Gallery, New York

Charles Simonds (b. 1945)

Wilted Towers, 1984

Unfired clay, $15 \times 24\frac{1}{4} \times 24\frac{1}{4}$

Collection of the artist

Temenos, 1989

Clay and wood, $12 \times 30\frac{1}{4} \times 30\frac{1}{4}$

Leo Castelli Gallery, New York

Towers and Chambers, 1989

Clay, $12 \times 28\frac{3}{8} \times 28\frac{3}{8}$

Leo Castelli Gallery, New York

Front Cover:

Michael McMillen, *Nipomo*, 1980